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PAPER READ BEFORE THE
COLUMBIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY
of Washington, D. C.,
TUESDAY, APRIL 21, 1914

By HENRY BARRETT LEARNED

Author of
THE PRESIDENT'S CABINET: Studies in the
Origin, Formation and Structure of
An American Institution

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By HENRY BARRETT LEARNED.

(Read before the Society, April 21, 1914.)

The Cabinet meeting has always been to contemporaries other than Cabinet members something of a mystery. Rumors as to proceedings and routine, the truth or falsity of which cannot easily be tested, keep in circulation and afford an attractive theme for gossip and guessing. For example, Cabinet days have long been known to be Tuesdays and Fridays. These were taken for granted as such under the present administration until someone ventured the statement during the past autumn that President Wilson had departed from one more precedent by abandoning Cabinet meetings altogether. The gossip-compelling assertion, whatever its source, fell upon listening ears. In the course of time, with an authentic sound as though coming from that center of mystery, the White House, word once more got into print that the President wished it understood that meetings of the Cabinet were being held twice a week with regularity; and moreover that no member of the council absented himself from the meetings, if present in Washington on a Cabinet day, without good reason. This second rumor with reference to the regularity of Cabinet meetings today I have been accidentally able to verify as correct. But it is not my purpose to speak of the stories as to present-day doings or practices in the Cabinet room in the White House, for the onlooker has as a rule no reliable sources of information about the nature of Cabinet meetings.

When in June, 1867, the Judiciary Committee of the House of Representatives was considering the problem

of impeaching President Johnson, it attempted to pry into the workings of Johnson's Cabinet, summoning most of the members as well as their private secretaries and questioning them closely. Stanton and Seward, according to Gideon Welles's intimate record in his *Diary*,¹

"thought the matter might be got along with by answering pretty fully all questions that were put without any allusion to the fact whether it was or was not a cabinet subject. I doubted [declared Welles] whether it was right to disclose what had occurred in Cabinet to such a committee,—perhaps to any one at present."

The sentiment probably represents an old ideal instinctively adopted by the intimate counsellors of any chief magistrate. Every administration is bound to have and to hold sacred its secrets. It must be admitted, consequently, at the outset that there are grave difficulties ahead of anyone who seeks to penetrate into the Cabinet meeting—at least to one who would get some way under the mere superficial forms and routine of the institution. Nevertheless there is abundant material to be found on the subject, much of which has not been at all carefully explored or studied. Intimate records such as letters, diaries and, occasionally, formal notes of Cabinet proceedings are to be found which help to tell the story of the meetings. Usually brought to light long after the events narrated, they afford belated, though vivid and illuminating transcripts for the historian.

Presidents have very frequently gained great credit for the ideas and efforts of Cabinet members or other assistants. The corollary to this proposition may be stated in the pregnant utterance of an old English

¹III, 102-103 (June 4, 1867).

Jesuit, quoted by Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff in his *Notes from a Diary*:

“It is surprising how much good a man may do in the world if he allows others to take the credit of it.”

The corollary may be easily illustrated in our own annals.

Though responsible for the idea of a farewell address, Washington, it is well known, accepted the aid of Hamilton and others in its final formulation in September, 1796. It may be doubted whether today careful students can accept the old view² that President Jefferson was unaided in the matter of the purchase of Louisiana. Gallatin, Levi Lincoln and others helped him in a confusing situation. It has been established satisfactorily that the Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, was chiefly responsible for persuading Monroe to adopt in his message of December, 1823, the words that are so well known today as constituting the essence of the so-called Monroe Doctrine.³ Who, it may be asked, were the authors of Jackson's leading state papers—of his messages and, in particular, of his Nullification Proclamation? In truth, it would be really difficult to prove that he wrote any one of them without much assistance. The Tariff Act of 1846, famous as a Democratic measure of far-reaching import, was the work of Polk's Secretary of the Treasury, Robert J. Walker, of Mississippi. Walker was likewise the creator of the statute in all its essential points which in 1849 established the Secretaryship and Department of the Interior,⁴ for he drew the bill at the request of a committee of Congress. Without detract-

²C. Ellis Stevens, *Sources of the Constitution of the United States* (1894), p. 167, ft. note 2.

³W. C. Ford, *John Quincy Adams: His Connection With the Monroe Doctrine* (1823), Cambridge, 1902.

⁴H. B. Learned, *The President's Cabinet* (1912), pp. 275-287.

ing from Lincoln's fame, one should remember that John Quincy Adams years before the Civil War "blazed the path" to the Proclamation of Emancipation of January 1, 1863.⁵ And there can be no doubt, on the basis of Welles's *Diary* and such portions of Chase's *Diary* as have thus far been printed,⁶ that the final form of the Proclamation was not attained without sundry consultations with his most intimate Cabinet advisers. "President Lincoln," said a writer in the *North American Review* of November, 1880, " . . . seldom or never had any Cabinet meetings." The statement today is reduced to the level of amusing fiction. We now know that George Bancroft, the historian, wrote President Johnson's first annual message of December, 1865.⁷ Seward and Stanton together formulated Johnson's veto message of the Tenure of Office Bill of March, 1867.⁸ Jeremiah S. Black was the author of Johnson's third annual message of December, 1867.⁹ Under date of June 13, 1870, President Grant issued a special message on Cuban affairs, indicating an attitude on the part of the United States of non-intervention. This was strictly the work of Secretary of State Hamilton Fish.¹⁰ Illustrations of the corollary may rest here. It is enough to conclude that most statesmen accomplish their ends by the active coöperation and intimate efforts of many advisers both in and outside the circle of the Cabinet.

I propose to limit this preliminary study of a large and refractory theme chiefly to the records and words

⁵C. F. Adams, *John Quincy Adams and Emancipation under Martial Law* (1819-1842), pp. 71 ff.

⁶*Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1902*, Vol. II.

⁷W. A. Dunning in *Amer. Hist. Review* (April, 1906), XI, 574 ff.

⁸*Diary of Gideon Welles* (1911), III, 157-158; see also *Amer. Hist. Review* (October, 1913), p. 110.

⁹W. A. Dunning, *op. cit.*, pp. 587, 592.

¹⁰W. A. Dunning, *Reconstruction, Political and Economic* (1907), p. 172.

of actual participants in the Cabinet meeting. Presidents and principal officers are alone competent, if they will, to tell at least that portion of the truth about the past which they had opportunity to know and to appreciate. The paper is based upon examination of written records—oftentimes very slight glimpses, it is true—from such men of upwards of 1,100 Cabinet meetings occurring at different periods of our history.

I.

It is fair to remember at the outset that our knowledge of Cabinet affairs since the incoming of Grant's administration in March, 1869, is comparatively slight. Grant adopted Tuesdays and Fridays as regular Cabinet days,¹¹ following the precedent in this respect of both Lincoln and Johnson. From such men as Hon. Hilary A. Herbert, Charles J. Bonaparte, John D. Long, and ex-Presidents Hayes and Harrison (among others) we have gained slight glimpses of Cabinet customs and affairs.¹² But there have not yet appeared in print any really informing records on Cabinet meetings in the shape of day-to-day diaries which would illuminate any portion of the past forty-five years of Cabinet history. The manuscript diary of Hamilton Fish, Grant's able Secretary of State, is in existence and has been consulted occasionally by scholars; and I am informed on good authority, that a member of President Roosevelt's Cabinet from 1905 to 1909 kept a careful record of sundry Cabinet councils. In the

¹¹Welles, *Diary*, III, 547 (March 8, 1869).

¹²Hilary A. Herbert, "Cleveland and His Cabinet at Work," *Century* (March, 1913), 85: 740-744. Charles J. Bonaparte, "Experiences of a Cabinet Officer Under Roosevelt," *Century* (March, 1910), 79: 752-758. John D. Long, "Some Personal Characteristics of President McKinley," *Century* (November, 1901), 63:144 ff. John D. Long, "The American Navy: Some Personal Reminiscences," *The Outlook* (October 3, 1903), 287-295. B. Harrison, *This Country of Ours* (1897), pp. 105-106. C. E. Stevens, *op. cit.*, p. 167, note 2.

course of time the historian may hope to have these and similar intimate records at his disposal. But until this time comes, we must rest content with the comparatively abundant resources of the years before 1869. Before turning to some of these earlier resources, I wish briefly to attend to a few matters pertaining to more recent Cabinet meetings.

The Cabinet meetings of President Harrison, held on Tuesdays and Fridays as a rule unless for any reason the President was obliged to be absent, were primarily conferences on national business and were devoted to "matters of importance affecting the general policy of the administration." Departmental matters might be brought forward whenever a principal officer desired a general discussion and opinion; but the rule was to determine all such matters as far as possible outside the council chamber, by conference between the President and the department head. The President was pronounced in his view against regarding a Cabinet officer as a "mere clerk." Notes of Cabinet affairs were rarely taken. Such social intercourse between the members as might be freely and easily indulged in—the give and take of commonplace conversation and gossip—came, if at all, only after the business was over and after the President had departed.¹³

Rather different impressions of President McKinley's council have come from ex-Secretary of the Navy John D. Long. A friendly and affable spirit such as was characteristic of Mr. McKinley pervaded the regular Tuesday-Friday sessions. The Cabinet was, we are assured, "not an over-solemn body." There was no parliamentary procedure "and never a formal vote."

¹³Private letter to the writer, dated March 2, 1911, from Harrison's Secretary of the Interior (1889-1893), Hon. John W. Noble.

"Nobody ever 'addressed the chair' or stood upon his feet. Matters were discussed in a conversational way. When the President had arrived at a result, he nodded to each member in succession, saying 'You agree?' until the last one had assented, and then wound the matter up by saying 'You all agree.' Rarely was there any non-consent. . ."

The meetings were not opened very promptly at 11 o'clock, for anecdotes and gossip, sometimes occupying fifteen or twenty minutes, were very apt to precede the real business of the sessions. When business was begun, the President called upon the principal officers in order of precedence, beginning as a matter of course with the Secretary of State.¹⁴ Considering the enormous business of the departments, it was noticeable, according to Mr. Long, "how comparatively much of it was disposed of by its head at his office and how little was brought up by him for Cabinet consideration."

Most of the members of the Cabinet—the Secretaries of State, John Sherman, William R. Day (later Associate Justice of the Supreme Court) and John Hay; Secretary of the Treasury Lyman J. Gage, Secretary of War Russell H. Alger, the Attorneys-General McKenna, Griggs and Knox; Gary, Postmaster-General, and Bliss, Secretary of the Interior—were usually quickly through their business. But Secretary of War Root (succeeding General Alger) had often many matters to bring forward, for in dealing with the Philippines he had to act "not only as Secretary of War but as Attorney-General and Secretary of State. . . " When Mr. Root's turn came, "it was recognized that there would be little time left for anybody else, especially as he spoke with a trained lawyer's fullness."

¹⁴Although the Postmaster-General was not regularly admitted to the Cabinet circle until 1829, he precedes the Secretary of the Navy in rank.

At length came the turn of the Secretary of Agriculture, James Wilson—"Scotch by birth but thoroughly American in every fiber. When Mr. Root finished his docket," remarks Mr. Long, "the time was usually so far exhausted that we at the foot of the table used to suggest merrily that it would be a fair thing to begin, sometimes, at the other end of the line. Still, it often happened that Wilson, whose word of hard common sense always weighed with the President, did get in a sentence or two that went directly to the heart of whatever subject was on tap" As one might suspect, it was John Hay who proved "a delight to the Cabinet Board, full of humor, apt in anecdote, showing in every word and phrase the cultivated scholar without the slightest trace of the pedant."

Such glimpses as these of two recent Cabinets are to be gained by hunting in popular records. They are certainly slight enough and afford hardly anything beyond sketches of routine and impressions of personalities. Yet they will serve the immediate purpose of illustrating the meagerness of our recent knowledge as compared with our knowledge of earlier times.

II.

When we speak of Washington's "Cabinet" what we see, if we stop to visualize its personnel, is the rather formal figure of Washington, grey-haired, tall, even imposing in stature, and four principal officers: Hamilton, the short, youthful-appearing Secretary of the Treasury; Jefferson, thirteen years older than Hamilton, at the head of the State Department; Randolph, the Attorney-General, former Governor of Virginia (like Jefferson) and chief spokesman for his State of Virginia in the Convention that formulated

the Constitution; and General Henry Knox, stout and stocky in figure, good-natured, deferential to his colleagues whom, in many respects, he recognized as intellectually his superiors. The fact that five other men—Timothy Pickering, Oliver Wolcott, Jr., Dr. James McHenry, William Bradford, of Pennsylvania, and Charles Lee—in 1794 and 1795 had taken the places of the first four hardly affects the popular recollection. Inasmuch as there is no clear evidence of any very marked homogeneity between the members of Washington's council and the President by the time, at any rate, that Hamilton resigned in the spring of 1795, there is some reason for the popular view. Hamilton, though youngest member, was distinctly the member on whom Washington put greatest dependence. The President listened carefully to whatever he had to say on many varieties of matters as well as on financial subjects. His written opinions, if not always revealing Jefferson's painstaking care, were sure to be discerning and could be very influential with Washington. Jefferson was enormously industrious and painstaking in the opinions which he wrote; and his letters and notes afford clear evidence of his regard for details. He disliked Hamilton, although he was not at all blind to his abilities and virtues. "Hot-headed, all imagination, no judgment, passionate, disrespectful & even indecent towards the P. in his written as well as verbal communications, talking of appeals from him to Congress, from them to the people, urging the most unreasonable & groundless propositions, & in the most dictatorial style . . ." Thus wrote Jefferson of Hamilton in a mood of irritability. "He renders my position immensely difficult," he added. "He does me justice personally, and, giving him time to vent himself & then cool, I am on a footing to advise him freely, & he re-

spects it, but he breaks out again on the very first occasion. . . ."¹⁵ "I *know*," declared Hamilton confidentially to Washington on September 9, 1792, "that I have been an object of uniform opposition from Mr. Jefferson, from the first moment of his coming to the City of New York to enter upon his present office . . . "¹⁶ Yet Jefferson, at times bitter enough to Hamilton, could thus say to Knox:

"When the hour of dinner is approaching, sometimes it rains, sometimes it is too hot for a long walk, sometimes your business would make you wish to remain longer at your office or return there after dinner, and make it more eligible to take any sort of a dinner in town—any day and every day that this would be the case you would make me supremely happy by messing with me, without ceremony or other question than whether I dine at home. The hour is from one quarter to three quarters after three, and taking your chance as to fare, you will be sure to meet a sincere welcome from

Yours Affectly. & respectfully . . ."¹⁷

Washington began his administration in May, 1789, by conferring with various men in matters of administrative and formal importance: with Madison, Jay, Hamilton, Vice-President Adams, and others. It was not until May, 1790,—a year later—that his four principal officers were together in New York City and consequently so placed as to be summoned readily by the President to a conference or consultation. If "consultations," as such assembled meetings of President and principal officers were at first called, occurred during 1790, they have escaped any record. Written opinions were frequently asked for; and there were

¹⁵Jefferson's *Writings* (ed. P. L. Ford. Federal edition), VII, 436-437. July 7, 1793. The outbreak at this time was due to the "Pacifcus" letters of Hamilton.

¹⁶Hamilton's *Works* (Fed. ed. H. C. Lodge), VII, 303 ff.

¹⁷Jefferson MSS. Special Subjects. Library of Congress.

conferences between Washington and this or that official. Probably consultations in council did actually take place as a reasonable mode of expediting matters. But the first explicit record of a consultation that was essentially a "Cabinet" meeting is only found in April, 1791. Jefferson, the Secretary of State, preserved careful details of it, and was present with his colleagues, Hamilton and Knox. Vice-President Adams was likewise at the meeting. The President himself had requested that such a meeting be called in his absence on a tour in the South in case administrative business seemed to warrant it; and he asked that the Vice-President be invited to attend. The meeting was held on Monday, April 11, probably at Jefferson's house, for the gentlemen dined together in the afternoon before settling down to serious work. The Attorney-General, Randolph, was not there.¹⁸ During 1791 and 1792 there are a few rather scanty allusions to or records of similar meetings—about a dozen such glimpses, all told, of as many meetings.

In 1793, the year best remembered by the issuance in April of the Neutrality Proclamation and the unfortunate and troublesome appearance of Genet, meetings of the Cabinet came thick and fast. The very seriousness of the situation probably kept the Cabinet together, for both Hamilton and Jefferson threatened to resign. Washington felt obliged to exact many written opinions from his three leading assistants, Hamilton, Jefferson, and Randolph, and a few such from Knox. At least forty-six Cabinet meetings are noted in different sources as occurring during that year—a conspicuously large number in view of the fact

¹⁸H. B. Learned, *The President's Cabinet*, pp. 123-125. There is not a contemporary word to show that Randolph was present, although Jefferson in 1818 thought that he recalled his presence!

that we have glimpses over the entire eight years of only about sixty-five meetings of the council. The meetings were usually held at the President's house in Philadelphia, at 9 o'clock in the morning. Rarely they were not assembled until 10 o'clock. One meeting—Friday, November 1—was held at Germantown. Now and then the council assembled at the War Office; occasionally at Jefferson's office; and once at the Governor's office in the State House. It is not by any means easy to determine exactly who was present. But one is perfectly safe in concluding that the Cabinet met a good many times by itself to arrange matters that were later on submitted to Washington's determining word.¹⁰ When a meeting was unduly prolonged, as on Friday, November 8, the principal officers dined together and (in this instance) with the President. Meetings were held on any one of the six days of the week, with some apparent tendency toward Mondays and Saturdays, although I have never found evidence of any such rule. There is no record of a council meeting on Sunday during Washington's entire administration.

International affairs and the right method of carrying out the principles of the Neutrality Proclamation, as well as the disposition of sundry prize cases, were before the council through the spring and summer of 1793. Later on, by November, it is clear that the subject of the President's annual message preoccupied Washington and his principal officers. Jefferson left the administration on December 31. And with his going the council gradually assumed a less interesting aspect, although there must have been numerous consultations over the Jay Treaty at a

¹⁰Such meetings without the President occurred on February 28, May 16, June 1, July 8, July 30, August 3 and 5.

later time, in view of the opposition revealed, in Congress and outside, toward England. Hamilton's influence remained strong over Washington and is particularly notable at the time, in 1796, when he had decided to issue his farewell address. But Jefferson's figure as a statesman disappeared for the time being until it was once more promoted to a rather conspicuous place, that of Vice-President, in 1797.

III.

At this point my materials take me forward to Monroe's peaceful administration, which opened in March, 1817, and lasted until the spring of 1825. James Monroe was not a man to cut a heroic figure during his time; and it is safe to say that the reader of history finds it difficult to recall him. He was fifty-nine years old at the outset of his Presidency. His Cabinet contained men of unusual accomplishments and notable talents. John Quincy Adams, trained as a diplomat, familiar with foreign ways and languages, carefully educated, scholarly, widely read—enough of a lawyer once to have been offered a seat upon the Supreme Court of the United States—high-minded, but not a man of winning ways, was appointed Secretary of State. He accepted the appointment, undertaking his task at the age of fifty—four years older than Jefferson when that statesman had been appointed to the same post by Washington. Calhoun, thirty-five years old in March, 1817, already a political leader familiar from experience with Congressional affairs and of great promise, was the youngest counsellor. He accepted the War portfolio and proved himself, especially in the routine of department work and reorganization, of conspicuous merit. William H. Crawford of Georgia

was Secretary of the Treasury through the eight years. For almost the same length of time William Wirt acted as Attorney-General, succeeding Richard Rush, who was held over a few months from Madison's term. The Navy Secretaryship had three incumbents: B. W. Crowninshield, Smith Thompson, who in 1823 went from the Cabinet to the Supreme Court, and Samuel L. Southard, of New Jersey, who was appointed at the age of thirty-six. Both Wirt and Southard were retained by Adams when in 1825 he became President, and served in the Cabinet until 1829, Wirt thus completing a term in the Attorney-Generalship of virtually twelve years.

Monroe had known Madison intimately both in and outside the Cabinet. He admired Jefferson, and kept up a correspondence with the sage of Monticello after his own term as President (in 1817) had begun. Long since Monroe had become reconciled to the memory, once very bitter, of his recall from France by Washington, and was even desirous of modeling his administration on that of the first Virginian President. In fact, rather excessive regard for dignity and form—the essence of the Washington tradition—was characteristic of the Monroe administration. The Cabinet was usually summoned through the Secretary of State at the President's request, notices being issued a day or so in advance of the meeting. Occasionally it assembled, however, the very day circumstances required, without more than verbal orders. Calhoun or Adams or any one of the Secretaries might suggest the desirability of the meeting to the President, and the Cabinet was thereupon assembled. "These Cabinet councils," remarked Adams, "open upon me a new scene and new views of the political world. Here is a play of passions, opinions, and characters different in many respects

from those in which I have been accustomed heretofore to move. There is always slowness, want of decision, and a spirit of procrastination in the President . . .'²⁰ Indeed, Adams's *Memoirs* afford abundant evidence of what may be termed a slow-gaited administration. Returning to his office about 3 o'clock one afternoon in February, 1819, after attending debates in the Senate and House of Representatives, the Secretary of State found a note from the President delivered by a messenger and requesting him to summon the Cabinet at the President's house on that day at 1:30 p. m.²¹ It must have been true of many a meeting which lasted three or four hours that—as Adams pointedly says—“conversation burned out.”²²

Adams's *Memoirs*, which constitute a detailed record but now and then reveal weeks and months of omissions, give evidence of about 180 meetings of the Cabinet over Monroe's eight years. Meetings were held with no uniformity, but on any one of the six weekdays. Sunday meetings were occasional, but very unusual. Over the eight years there is a slight preponderance of Tuesday-Friday sessions; but there was no such rule, I think, established. The Cabinet met “at the President's,” occasionally in the office of the Secretary of the Treasury, once in Smith Thompson's office (Navy Department). At the close of sessions of Congress, the President and his assistants assembled in the Vice-President's room at the Capitol. Twelve o'clock (noon) or one o'clock was the customary hour of the meetings. They were concluded as a rule by four p. m. Monroe dined in the late afternoon, probably about five o'clock. In the case of a few very pro-

²⁰January 9, 1818. *Memoirs*, IV, 37.

²¹*Memoirs*, IV, 245. February 5, Friday.

²²*Ibid.* IV, 168. Saturday, November 7, 1818.

longed meetings, the Cabinet dined with the President and even discussed business after dinner into the night. In the latter part of July, 1818, the Cabinet met for six consecutive consultations on as many days, Sunday alone interrupting the strict continuity of the sessions. The chief topic was Andrew Jackson and his actions in Florida.²³ There are two meetings that for length deserve especially to be recalled: those of Monday and Tuesday, June 21-22, 1824. The first of these opened at 9:30 a. m. and was concluded about 7 p. m. The second meeting lasted from 8 a. m. to 9:30 p. m. "with the interval of about an hour to dine, which we did at the President's. . . ."²⁴ The case before the council on the two days was that of Ninian Edwards, first Senator from the new State of Illinois and at the time Minister to Mexico, who, on reaching New Orleans on the way there, had been recalled in consequence of charges brought against him by Crawford, Secretary of the Treasury. Edwards had attacked Crawford for the purpose of interfering with Crawford's chances for the Presidency. The attack embittered Crawford and so affected him that the Secretary of the Treasury must have been rather a useless counsellor for the remainder of the administration, for his aspirations brought him into real antagonism with both Calhoun and Adams.^{24a} About this time the *National Intelligencer* was so pronounced in its advocacy of Crawford's ambition that the rest of the Cabinet determined to lend favor to the *National Journal*, for a time well known and edited by Peter Force.

As happened in Washington's time, the Cabinet occasionally met without, or in the absence of, the

²³*Memoirs*, IV, 107-114. July 15-21, 1818.

²⁴*Ibid.* VI, 389 ff.

^{24a}Crawford was present at not a single session of the Cabinet from April to November 10, 1824. *Memoirs*, VI, 426.

President.²⁵ On rare occasions the chairman of a Congressional committee might attend a Cabinet session. But the council's affairs were naturally regarded as essentially private and not to be divulged. On January 5, 1822, Postmaster-General R. J. Meigs was summoned to a Cabinet meeting—the first clear instance of this that I have discovered, for the Postmaster-General was not yet a member by custom of the Cabinet. Careful written queries as in Washington's time were now and then introduced into a Cabinet meeting by President Monroe. If these were constitutional questions, the President at times asked for written opinions from members other than the Attorney-General. Some of these opinions in March, 1820, over the Missouri situation, involving the problem of slavery, were deposited in the Department of State at Monroe's request.²⁶

The years of the administration were sufficiently full of difficulties, both of a domestic and foreign nature, to call into activity the able powers of Monroe's assistants. Adams considered that his two really important contributions to this portion of his time were the treaty with Spain which gave us Florida and his report on weights and measures. He was the author of the Monroe Doctrine. In most respects he was the dominant man in the Cabinet, as he was the oldest and most experienced. Little enough is there in the record of either Crowninshield or Smith Thompson. Southard was an intimate friend of Wirt and appreciated Adams sufficiently to be able to work with him through the

²⁵Wednesday, March 31; Friday, April 2, 1819; Saturday, January 22, 1820.

²⁶For instances of strangers at Cabinet sessions, see *Memoirs* under dates: January 7, 1819; January 5, 1822; May 26, 1824. "Had Congress a Constitutional right to prohibit slavery in a Territory?" was one of the questions on which opinions were written and deposited in the State Department. *Memoirs*, V, 5 ff.

next four years. Calhoun went to the Vice-Presidency in 1825—to reappear many years later as Secretary of State under Tyler.

IV.

Although Monroe tried hard to get a western man into his council, he was unsuccessful. Henry Clay, aged forty-eight when he accepted the headship of the Department of State under Adams in March, 1825, was the first Westerner to enter the Cabinet. Both Wirt, the Attorney-General, and James Barbour, Secretary of War, were his seniors by a few years. Southard, Secretary of the Navy—like Wirt, inherited by Adams from the Monroe Cabinet—was the youngest member, aged thirty-eight. Richard Rush, arriving in mid-summer, assumed the Treasury portfolio, though he would have been glad to exchange it with Southard for that of the Navy. There was one change in the personnel during the four-year term: Barbour was replaced as Secretary of War by Peter B. Porter, of New York, in 1828. The average age of the Cabinet was forty-eight years—compared to forty years, the average of Washington's counsellors. President Adams went so far as to ask Crawford to remain at the head of the Treasury. This Crawford was disinclined to do. Had he succeeded, in accordance with his real desires, in getting Gallatin to accept the place, he would have had two first-rate figures in his council instead of only one.

President Adams's Cabinet met relatively with decidedly less frequency than Monroe's, if the records of the *Memoirs* may be trusted. The President was much inclined to settle as much business as possible in conference with this or that member of the Secretariat alone. The reasons for this conference method were

partly due to the lack of any very moving issues either in domestic or foreign affairs. The Panama Congress was a notable consideration early in the administration, and the Tariff—chiefly in the hands of Congress—was conspicuous from 1827 onwards. Careful attention was given by the council to the annual messages every autumn, and Novembers revealed thirteen—exactly one-fifth of the total meetings recorded: viz., sixty-five. We are left with no precise statements as to the ordinary meeting place, but it is reasonable to assume that the Cabinet met as a rule at the Executive Mansion, except when Adams accompanied his counsellors to the Vice-President's chamber at the Capitol at the close of sessions. The hour of meetings was apt to be one o'clock p. m. and the time of concluding them was five p. m. Evening sessions of the council were rare. Again there is no evidence of regular days; but the Cabinet is not recorded as meeting at all on Sunday. About a fifth of the recorded meetings occurred on Mondays, and the same proportion on Saturdays, but almost as many are found to have occurred on Wednesdays. The President dined about five p. m. and considered the next two hours daily to be relatively leisurely.

Now and then the Cabinet met without the President, on one occasion deliberately asking to be left to itself. It was in November, 1826, when the subject of the message was before them. This is Adams's statement. The Secretariat, he says, asked that—

“the draft of the message when prepared might be sent to the members of the administration, to be considered by them without my being present; that the discussion might be more free than would be respectful in my presence. I said I saw no material objection to this. . .”²⁷

²⁷*Memoirs*, VII, 190-192.

It is rather surprising, in view of Adams's well-known care in the regulations of his own daily existence, to discover that he treated somewhat casually the matter of an occasional council meeting. In February, 1828, definite word of a Cabinet session had gone forth for Friday, the 15th instant, at one o'clock. Finding that Governor Barbour had a wedding that day at his house, the meeting was accordingly postponed to the following day, Saturday. Learning on Saturday morning that, in view of the adjournment of the House of Representatives, the hall of the House was to be used "for the exhibition of the deaf and dumb teachers and pupils," President Adams at noon walked to the Capitol—

"leaving directions at home that if the members of the Administration should come at one, to ask them to wait a short time for my return from the Capitol, and ordered my carriage to be there for me at one."

The exhibition of the deaf and dumb proved so thoroughly absorbing to the President that he remained at the Capitol throughout the three hours of the exercises. Vice-President Calhoun was also there, and Mr. Speaker Stevenson. Both of these gentlemen interrogated the pupils. Then President Adams, as he tells us in all seriousness in his record of the day, asked a few questions:

"I asked Mr. Gallaudet if he could make them [the pupils] understand the difference between irrefragable and incontrovertible. He said he could not immediately discern the distinction between them himself. . . . I desired the question to be put them if they knew the figure over the clock in the hall; but they did not. Afterwards I enquired if they could tell the name of the Muse of History. One of them said he had forgotten it; but the question still did not suggest to him that it was the figure over the clock. . . ."

Soon after this the President named Plato as a subject fit for a brief sketch. He was apparently pleased when a pupil "immediately wrote down a short account of his life, death and writings." When the President reached home Clay, Barbour, and Southard had long since departed. As a sort of consolatory item he remarks that Wirt "came afterwards, and I had a very long conversation with him about the Cherokee Constitution and the Indian titles to lands." The Cabinet was finally assembled on the following Tuesday, February 19, at one o'clock.²⁸ Let us hope that no one was peevish or out of temper with Presidential dilatoriness!

There are several indications that when men absented themselves from Cabinet sessions, they sent excuses or apologized for failures to attend.²⁹ On one occasion Adams declined to allow Wirt to escape from a meeting,³⁰ although it is clear that the Attorneys-General of most of the early Cabinets were much less regular in attendance than the Secretaries. Toward the close of his term Adams felt some lack of harmony in his council. Clay threatened to resign, and Barbour (who was not highly regarded by the President) left the Cabinet. In connection with Barbour's going, it is interesting to discover that Adams yielded to the views of his Cabinet in the matter of Porter's substitution. He would himself have much preferred to appoint a certain John Williams, of Tennessee, to the War Department. But in order, as he says, "to terminate the administration in harmony with itself" he named General Peter Buel Porter, a hero of the War

²⁸*Memoirs*, VII, 434-442 (*passim*).

²⁹*Memoirs*, VI, 54 (November 16, 1825); VII, 444 (February 22, 1828).

³⁰*Ibid.*, VII, 235 (March 6, 1827).

of 1812, once appointed Commander-in-Chief of the Army by James Madison.³¹

But Adams was quite able to take a stand independent of most of his Cabinet; and this stand he took in the problem, very embittered in its day, of the successor as Major-General and Commander-in-Chief of the Army to General Brown, who died on February 24, 1828. The matter was under consideration by the Cabinet for nearly two months. Four candidates for the position were named, everyone of whom had sturdy advocates: Scott, Gaines, Macomb and Harrison. “. . . upon whichever of the four the choice may be fixed,” wrote Adams, “there will be great clamor from the friends of all the others, and from the adversaries of the Administration generally.”³² At the decisive moment a Cabinet council assembled, April 14, 1828 (Monday). The claims of the four candidates were canvassed, “their merits critically scanned, their defects freely noticed, and their comparative pretensions weighed. They so nearly balanced one another that every member of the Administration had much difficulty in coming to a decided preference. Mr. Clay, Governor Barbour, Mr. Southard, and Mr. Wirt finally and somewhat indecisively joined their voices in favor of Scott; Mr. Rush more positively preferring Macomb, with which my own opinion concurred. I attributed the preference of Scott to a feeling of which these gentlemen were probably themselves not conscious—the Virginian sympathy. Mr. Clay had also Western biases inclining him towards Harrison; but he would not allow that Gaines was from Tennessee, or that Tennessee was a Western State. There was not one

³¹*Ibid.*, VIII, 4-5 (May 20, 1828).

³²*Memoirs*, VII, 505.

voice for Gaines. . . .'³³ Adams appointed Macomb. Rush never forgot as long as he lived that he was the single member of the council in accord with the President, and years later—on Tuesday, January 19, 1847—he told Polk, at the moment concerned over a similar problem, the story of this Cabinet meeting and of his share in it.³⁴

President John Quincy Adams went out of office in rather an embittered mood. On Tuesday, March 3, after a busy time at the Capitol, he took leave of all his advisers but Clay. That night at nine o'clock he left the President's house, having already determined with the aid of the advice of his counsellors to have nothing whatever to do with the inauguration ceremonies of his successor, Andrew Jackson. He was the last of six men nurtured in the East and in revolutionary-day surroundings to administer the Presidency. Like his predecessors, he had done much to help establish certain forms in accordance with the Washington tradition which could hardly be forgotten or quite ignored, although men of a different type touched by other ideals were to be in the saddle.

V.

The epoch of James K. Polk was exciting. Questions of expansion and slavery were much discussed along with the military features of the Mexican War. The recent publication of Polk's *Diary*—a work which appeared about sixty years after his untimely death in June, 1849,—is likely to do service in quickening interest in the man; and will, I think, raise him in estimate among historians. For glimpses of nearly 400 Cabinet

³³*Ibid.*, VII, 506-507.

³⁴Polk's *Diary*, II, 342-344.

sessions it is quite a unique record. In fact, it is doubtful if a single meeting of the Cabinet from August 26, 1845, to Sunday, March 4, 1849, went unrecorded in it. There is some entry, however brief, every day that Polk occupied the Executive Mansion from August 26, when the *Diary* was first begun. And a Cabinet session is invariably noted, sometimes with very careful detail.

Polk was forty-nine years old when he came to the Presidency in March, 1845—the youngest incumbent of the great office up to his time. Just before he reached his forty-third birthday (in October, 1901) Theodore Roosevelt fell heir to the same office. Polk was a Tennessee Democrat, friend of Andrew Jackson and a great admirer of Thomas Jefferson. His experience in the national House of Representatives—for a time as Speaker—had been long and honorable, and very industrious. Nominated to the Presidency as a “dark horse” largely because of his pronouncements in favor of a policy of territorial expansion, he and Dallas as Vice-President carried the country by no very substantial popular vote against Clay and Frelinghuysen. Polk’s Cabinet contained three men of large ability: the oldest, William Learned Marcy, a former governor of New York, at the age of fifty-eight accepted the head of the War Department; James Buchanan at the age of fifty-four accepting the State Department, proving very troublesome to Polk because of sundry disagreements and especially because of political ambition to succeed to the Presidency in 1849; and Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, Secretary of the Treasury, aged forty-four, five years Polk’s junior. The other members of the Cabinet were George Bancroft of Massachusetts, Secretary of the Navy, succeeded in 1846 by John Y. Mason of Virginia; Nathan Clifford

of Maine, Attorney-General, who was replaced in that position by Isaac Toucey of Connecticut, and Cave Johnson of Tennessee, Postmaster-General.

One of the most marked features of the term was the intimacy—evident on almost every page of the *Diary*—that was kept up between the President and party leaders in both the House and the Senate. Even the aged Calhoun was admitted early in 1846 to a session of the Cabinet.³⁵ Senator Benton throughout the first two years of the administration was many times in conference with Polk, as was Senator Cass in the latter years. Vice-President Dallas often was consulted by Polk, although there is no evidence that he ever attended a session of the Council. Thomas Ritchie, editor of the *Union*, was carefully consulted on various occasions and allowed presidential secrets to slip into his partisan publication, at times much to President Polk's disgust. We get glimpses of the figure of Andrew Johnson flitting in and out of the Executive Mansion even thus early—distrusted and disliked by Polk. Johnson and his Tennessee colleagues, remarked Polk, "seem to assume to themselves the right to judge of the appointments in Tennessee, and to denounce them among members of Congress and in boarding houses as though they were responsible for them. I think it fortunate," he continues, "that they have now learned that their course has not been unobserved by me."³⁶ Polk went so far as himself to outline an article for Ritchie's *Union* even more than once:

"It is the second or third time since I have been President that I have sketched an article for the paper. I did so in this instance to allay if possible the excitement which I learned the article in yesterday's *Union* had produced. . ."³⁷

³⁵*Diary*, I, 161. January 10.

³⁶*Ibid.*, II, 41. July 21, 1846.

³⁷*Ibid.*, I, 351-352. April 24, 1846.

There were numerous outsiders admitted at odd times to Cabinet sessions, usually for the sake of giving special information either about the progress of the War or other matters nearer home. Among these note may be made of Brigadier-General Kearny³⁸ and Major-General Shields,³⁹ Mayor Seaton of Washington,⁴⁰ Thomas G. Clemson, son-in-law to Calhoun and recently returned from Belgium where he had served as *chargé d'affaires*⁴¹ and Senator Jarnagin and Representative Wheaton as members of the committee on enrolled bills.⁴² Nicholas Trist, clerk in the State Department, was summoned into one session for the sake of translating a Spanish letter.⁴³ Polk's private secretary, J. Knox Walker, was often in the room during Cabinet meetings.⁴⁴

Has there, it may be asked, been any President since 1789 who stuck so steadily to his job as did President Polk? Polk was very particular to indicate to all his advisers at the outset of his term that he expected none of them to leave Washington for slight reasons or for any length of time while they served him. He had decided convictions against the practice of entrusting affairs to chief clerks. As for himself during the entire four-year period, Polk was not outside Washington for more than about six weeks. How many Presidents, it may be asked, have confined themselves to vacations of ten days a year? Polk spent a day at Mt. Vernon in the spring of 1845 (before the *Diary*

³⁸*Diary*. III, 168. September 12, 1847.

³⁹*Ibid.*, III, 261. December 28, 1847.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, IV, 125. September 19, 1848.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, IV, 196. November 14, 1848.

⁴²*Ibid.*, I, 47, 51. July 25, 1846.

⁴³*Ibid.*, II, 432. March 20, 1847.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, II, 486. April 22, 1847. ". . . my Private Secretary is often in the room when the Cabinet is in session and he is the only person except the Cabinet who is so."

opens);⁴⁵ late in August, 1846, for about a week he was at Old Point Comfort; in May-June, 1847, he was on a visit of nine days to the University of North Carolina, of which he was a graduate; he went for a fortnight's tour to New England to attend a Masonic celebration in June-July, 1847; and finally in the late summer (August) of 1848 he was for ten days at Bedford Springs, Pennsylvania. There were no other absences from the seat of government. Moreover there was no cessation of cabinet meetings while he was in Washington from the August when the *Diary* opens. The regularity of Cabinet sessions, regular and "special," becomes positively irksome in the record. But in this respect Polk's theory and practices were in perfect accord. Listen to his words:

"No President who performs his duty faithfully and conscientiously can have any leisure. If he entrusts the details and smaller matters to subordinates constant errors will occur. I prefer to supervise the whole operations of the Government myself rather than entrust the public business to subordinates and this makes my duties very great."⁴⁶

This was not idle sentiment on Polk's part, as the record of his administration clearly proves. But he was ill at times during his last year (1848), and one may reasonably conclude that he was suffering from his incessant and tireless labors.

There is a passage in the *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman*⁴⁷ which, besides error, contains some elements of truth at this point worth noting. Polk, says Quitman's biographer,

"was a political martinet, a rigid disciplinarian. . . . He was a man of ability, but a man of expediency. . . . Polk was grave almost to sadness, self-restrained, and chilling. . .

⁴⁵*Diary*, II, 87.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, IV, 261. December 29, 1848.

⁴⁷I, 228-235 (*passim*).

(He) was indebted for his elevation to his energy, his circumspection, his capacity for labor, his fidelity to party, and, more than all, to the influence of Gen. Jackson. . . He had a vigorous and able cabinet—one of the ablest ever assembled around any executive. . . . but he can be regarded as a man of mediocrity. . . exempt from positive vices, remarkable for his prudence, and a thorough master of the strategy of politics. . . He, nevertheless, in four years, witnessed the decay of his popularity, and no one but himself dreamed of his re-election.”

It may be questioned whether “mediocrity” is to be lightly applied to this President who stands out conspicuously between Jackson on the one side and Lincoln on the other. He certainly did not “dream” of or wish to be reëlected to the office of President. In other respects the passage is discerning and probably fair.

Whether Polk was the first President to introduce regularity into Cabinet sessions I do not feel altogether certain, for as yet I have had no time to examine into the practices of the Cabinet during the Jackson-Van Buren-Tyler terms. But Polk’s Cabinet met as a rule every week throughout the year, if the President was not himself away from Washington: on Tuesdays and Saturdays at eleven a. m. in the forenoon. In one year alone—1846, during which war with Mexico was begun—the Council met about 114 times. In 1848, the year which closed treaty negotiations, there were approximately 120 meetings of the Cabinet. As I reckon it through the *Diary* evidence, there were 173 meetings on Tuesdays and about 168 meetings on Saturdays. All others, about 50, known as “special” meetings, were summoned on any one of the other days of the week. It was against Polk’s strict sabbatarian views to summon the Cabinet to Sunday sessions, but occasionally he

found it necessary to do so, although against his will. He never willingly missed attendance at church at eleven o'clock Sunday mornings. The regular sessions of the Cabinet were seldom over before two p. m. Many meetings can be found sitting as late as three or four o'clock. Polk's regular dinner-hour came at four. Evening consultations were occasional. Four and five hour sessions were termed long. Now and again when the President was indisposed Cabinet meetings had to be omitted. The laying of the corner-stone of the Smithsonian Institution and the public funeral of John Quincy Adams were among incidents that made it seem fitting to omit meetings of the Council.

Unlike the meetings of Adams's Cabinet, which were devoted to a few rather specific problems and were not frequent or at all regular, those of Polk were usually alive with variety of business and discussion. The epoch was alert. Its problems—especially those which were generated by the Oregon question and the War—were grave and complicated, burdened with consequences of a doubtful kind. Large subjects inevitably came before the Council: the tariff, Texas, Oregon, California, slavery, army troubles, most of which demanded the enunciation of more or less definite executive policy and attitude. But on the other hand there were numerous matters of minor, if not of petty significance: the Cabinet heard much political gossip and discussed it; it watched observantly the proceedings of Congress, and guided itself to some extent by what it observed. Polk and his advisers, especially Buchanan ambitious himself for the Presidency when he found that he could not easily get to the Supreme Court, scanned carefully many newspaper criticisms, and even attempted to dictate to sundry newspapers. The subject of office-seeking politicians, haunting Polk day and

night throughout his term, could not help coming at times into conciliar discussion. The four annual messages, prepared by Polk promptly and with remarkable care, were not only submitted to the Cabinet but to men of influence and discretion outside that body—to Vice-President Dallas, Editor Ritchie, Senators Benton and Cass and many others. The fourth and last message of Polk which, among presidential papers, must be reckoned remarkable always and was clearly deemed by Polk as his valedictory word to his Democratic followers as well as to the nation, was given slow and long attention. The President yielded his convictions neither easily nor as a rule for petty reasons. Politics influenced him. But he seldom forgot principles even though he had to sacrifice the friendship and influence of men as powerful as Senator Benton of Missouri and to some extent the assistance of Buchanan. A less prudent and sagacious man would probably have failed to hold through the administration three such ambitious and able advisers as Buchanan, Marcy, and Walker, for at one time or another they were all ready to abandon their places.

Votes in Cabinet sessions were exceedingly rare.⁴⁸ Like most Presidents before and since his time, Polk asked now and then for written opinions on technical matters of law from his Attorneys-General.⁴⁹ But he never seems to have taken written opinions from the rest of his counsellors. On this point his own words are conclusive. He wrote:

"I have never called for any written opinions from my Cabinet, preferring to take their opinions, after a discussion in Cabinet & in presence of each other. In this way harmony of opinion is more likely to exist. . . ."⁵⁰

⁴⁸*Diary*, III, 281.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, II, 79. IV, 202.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, IV, 131. September 23, 1848.

Thus a practice begun by Washington and peculiarly characteristic of the first President was willfully on Polk's part abandoned.

Polk would have liked to engage Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire as his Attorney-General in place of John Y. Mason transferred to the Navy portfolio on Bancroft's departure in 1846.⁵¹ He yielded to his Council's wishes, on Pierce's declining the place, naming Peter Vroom of New Jersey. When Vroom likewise declined, Polk got his second choice for the position in the person of Isaac Toucey of Connecticut, many years later Buchanan's Secretary of the Navy and predecessor of Gideon Welles. In some respects the case was parallel to President Adams's decision to accept General Peter B. Porter as his second Secretary of War in succession to Governor Barbour.

When in the spring of 1847 Polk was disturbed over questions of precedence among army officers and other similar matters, Richard Rush, then an elderly man of sixty-five and about to undertake his duties as minister to France—once Attorney-General under Madison and later (as I have pointed out) Secretary of the Treasury under John Quincy Adams—spent the late evening of Tuesday, January 19th, with Polk. The President took keen delight in talking with Rush, and recorded this recollection of Rush in his *Diary*. Polk wrote:

“He gave me a very interesting account of the appointment of a General-in-chief of the army upon the death of Maj'r Gen'l Brown. He said that Gen'l (s) Gaines & Scott had both written very exceptionable & violent letters to the President, each claiming the office, the one by virtue of his *lineal* & the other of his *Brevet* rank. He said that Mr. Clay was warmly in favour of Gen'l Scott; that Messrs. Barbour, Southard, & Wirt also expressed a preference for Gen'l

⁵¹*Ibid.*, II, 102. August 27, 1846.

Scott. He said that for himself he had been silent during the discussions, which had occasionally taken place during a period of more than six weeks, but that finally his opinion was asked in Cabinet by the President & he gave it in favour of Gen'l Macomb, upon the ground that he thought neither Gaines nor Scott ought to be appointed after the very exceptionable letters which they had written. The President (Mr. Adams) who had never before expressed an opinion, Mr. Rush said, upon hearing his opinion in favour of Gen'l Macomb straightened himself up in his seat, and in his peculiar manner said 'and I think so too.' Mr. Rush said this was unexpected and produced great astonishment in the Cabinet, and came very near breaking up the Cabinet. He said as the members of the Cabinet retired, on the walk from the President's mansion Mr. Clay was vehement on the subject, and expressed warmly the opinion that they could not get along under such treatment from the President. He said he interposed to allay the excitement & advised moderation. The President appointed Gen'l Macomb and the matter here ended."⁵²

In all essential details this account, in comparison with the record of Adams's *Memoirs* of Monday, April 14, 1828, appears to be correct, although slightly elaborated. It shows how clear an impression of a sensational Cabinet session nineteen years before remained in Rush's memory. Moreover, it is a real piece of evidence of Polk's ability to reproduce accurately the essential points of a conversation with a comparative stranger.

In concluding this account of Polk's Cabinet meetings, attention should be called to a matter of policy extending over many sessions of the Council in which Polk showed his independence and principle. It may not be at once recalled that there was a widespread and vigorous movement in 1847-48, led by a number of

⁵²*Diary*, II, 343-344. See *supra*, pp. 116-117.

prominent politicians, to force Polk to the task of absorbing the whole of Mexico. That we escaped annexing all of Mexico in 1848 was due to some variety of causes. But not the least of these was that President Polk effectually controlled the policy of this government in spite of several intimate assistants, such as Buchanan and R. J. Walker, who would have had him reject the treaty negotiated by Nicholas Trist in accordance with Polk's instructions given him in April, 1847, at the time when Trist was sent on a treaty-making mission.⁵³

By the time that Polk was ready to leave office in 1849 the Cabinet was a thoroughly well-established and matured institution. That he had done a good deal to fix certain customs I am inclined to believe; he was a stickler for regularity in administrative practices—remarkably vigilant in keeping himself and his intimate assistants at work throughout the four-year term. It may safely be conjectured that the Cabinet never met without the President. Moreover we probably know with a rare degree of precision what was said and done at many of these sessions. As the President kept his hand on a great many matters, so he often was prepared to be the real director of discussions and the author of the administration's attitude or policy so far as the executive department was concerned. He had several conspicuously able assistants about him. Nevertheless, if one may trust impressions gathered largely from the *Diary*, he was never overpowered by any one of these able men. It is the President who at length dominates the situation by his ability to grasp its de-

⁵³I have hastened over this paragraph in view of the detailed and careful consideration given to this phase of my subject by the late Professor E. G. Bourne. See his *Essays in Historical Criticism* (1901), pp. 226 ff. "The Proposed Absorption of Mexico in 1847-1848," Mr. Bourne made use of Polk's *Diary*, at the time in MS.

tails and, though aided by others, to understand it. In the Cabinet Council Polk was the unmistakable guide and master. Ceremonies he disliked; but he cherished such forms as aided him and his colleagues in getting things done. The fact that Mrs. Dolly Madison and Mrs. Alexander Hamilton were not unfamiliar figures in presidential circles in the national Capital during the administration may serve to suggest that the executive part of the government was still influenced to some extent by ideals and practices of an earlier day. Solemn and serious as Polk undoubtedly was, over-worked and something of a martinet, he remains as the most interesting figure in the Presidency between Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln.

VI.

Mr. Lincoln's Cabinet, composed of seven members (including a Secretary of the Interior in accordance with the establishment of such an office in 1849—Caleb Smith of Indiana), averaged in ages men of about fifty-five. Lincoln himself was but fifty-two when he undertook his great task in March, 1861. Edward Bates of Missouri, Attorney-General, was sixty-eight years old—the oldest member of the Council. Simon Cameron who left the headship of the War Department in January, 1862, to be succeeded then by Edwin M. Stanton, was sixty-two. Seward was sixty. Most of the other cabinet associates were under sixty. Montgomery Blair of Maryland, Postmaster-General, Stanton, Dennison of Ohio and J. P. Usher, successor to the inconsequential Smith—the last two entering the Cabinet long after its first organization—were under fifty. Seward and Chase, both of whom had been aspirants for the chief office, were naturally the conspicuous figures—able men destined to leave a mark in history. Of

the others, Stanton, Welles, and Fessenden were forceful, although no one of these last made much of an appeal to the popular imagination.

Whether by chance or by reason of a precedent slightly different from that set by the Polk practice and adopted sometime between 1849 and 1861, Lincoln's Cabinet adopted soon after its early and irregular meetings the Tuesday-Friday rule for regular sessions. Welles's *Diary* affords glimpses of about 166 Cabinet meetings between July, 1862, and April 14, 1865. The sessions of the Cabinet during 1863 and 1864 were certainly frequent on the regular days, "special" meetings being summoned on most any other day of the week except Sunday. Now and then Sunday meetings occurred; but there are, I think, only six meetings recorded as taking place on Sunday during the Lincoln-Johnson period, from 1862 to 1869. Neither Lincoln nor Johnson revealed any sabbatarian opposition to such assemblings of the Council.

In March, 1861, the variety of personal elements brought suddenly into close proximity, the chaotic administrative conditions left as a heritage to his successor by Buchanan, and the peculiar outward circumstances of the political situation made the process of adjustment between Lincoln and his advisers certain to be slow and likely to be difficult. "Few comparatively know or can appreciate," wrote Welles, "the actual condition of things and state of feeling of the members of the administration in those days. Nearly sixty years of peace had unfitted us for any war; but the most terrible of all wars—a civil one—was upon us and it had to be met. Congress had adjourned without making any provision for the storm, though aware it was at hand and soon to burst upon the country. A new administration, scarcely acquainted with each

other, and differing essentially in the past, was compelled to act, promptly and decisively.''⁵⁴

Of the earliest cabinet meetings the Secretary of the Navy has this to say:

"Cabinet-meetings, which should, at that exciting and interesting period, have been daily, were infrequent, irregular, and without system. The Secretary of State notified his associates when the President desired a meeting of the heads of Departments. It seemed unadvisable to the Premier—as he liked to be called and considered—that the members should meet often, and they did not. Consequently there was very little concerted action.''⁵⁵

Seward, we are informed, was invariably present before the gatherings of the counsellors and assumed the leading place, mindful no doubt of his familiarity with and experience in affairs of state from the days of his governorship to his work as Senator from the most conspicuous state in the Union. He failed, however, to impress either the President or his colleagues with his knowledge of the demands of the new situation. It was not long before his arrogant assumption of power and his actions became among members of the Cabinet matters of common gossip. Bates of Missouri, the elderly Attorney-General, and Chase of the Treasury Department expressed themselves openly in Council on the subject of the desultory discussions, the lack of system, and of that concert and comity which should prevail in a really strong administration. There was apparently no set hour for Cabinet sessions. No seats were assigned. Outsiders appeared—a miscellaneous variety whose advice promised to be useful. In brief, without any rules or regulations, general disorder prevailed.⁵⁶

⁵⁴*Diary of Gideon Welles* (1911), I, 549. March 30, 1864.

⁵⁵*Diary*, I, 136. September 16, 1862.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, I, 136-138.

The form of proceedings was at length considered. Lincoln was modest, inexperienced, doubtful. But he was sagacious enough to concentrate results, "and often determined questions adversely to the Secretary of State, taking Seward's opinions as well as those of the others for what they were worth and generally no more." Bates, perhaps prompted by the President, suggested that Cabinet sessions be held on stated days. Special calls, he thought, might be issued if business or exceptional circumstances demanded them. It was the impression of several advisers that high appointments, hitherto made by the heads separately, should be matters for general consultation. Seward and Chase in particular—the latter having very extensive patronage under his control—had settled sundry appointments with the President alone, and perhaps occasionally on their own independent judgments. "Each of these gentlemen had high aspirations. Each had been chief Executive of his State. Each had represented his state in the Senate, and each had a distinct party position and, to some extent, a personal following."⁵⁷ It was no doubt natural that they should both consider themselves in the light of privileged characters. At any rate they did so.

The circumstances of the period between April 12—the day that Sumter was attacked—and the assembling of the special session of Congress on July 4, 1861, brought into operation a new principle, that of a temporary dictatorship. "All the powers of government were virtually concentrated in a single department, and that the department whose energies were directed by the will of a single man."⁵⁸ Inevitably these circum-

⁵⁷G. Welles, *Lincoln and Seward* (1874), p. 48.

⁵⁸W. A. Dunning, *Essays on the Civil War and Reconstruction* (1898), pp. 20-21.

stances had, it may be assumed, much to do with setting in order and quickening what may be termed the machinery of the Cabinet. Cabinet meetings began to be held with greater frequency. The Cabinet helped to formulate numerous executive orders and plans which were the means of putting into operation the war powers of the President. Confronted by vast responsibility, the Cabinet issued papers and accomplished acts that might, under ordinary circumstances, have brought them all to the scaffold.⁵⁹

The hour of meeting was in the forenoon, usually at eleven o'clock. Exceptionally the session was called as early as nine, or again as late as twelve or even one o'clock. Occasionally there was an evening session as, for example, that of Sunday, February 5, 1865,⁶⁰ in the record of which no hour is stated. On the basis of much evidence in the *Diary* I should venture the guess that meetings of Lincoln's Cabinet seldom consumed more than two hours of time. There were occasionally stories from Lincoln at the beginning or near the close, some variety of gossip; but the real business was apt to be quickly disposed of. Now and again one finds records of cabinet sessions held during parts of consecutive days—as for instance the meetings of Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, the last three days of December, 1862, just preceding the final issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.⁶¹ Again, at the most critical military moment of the War, the Cabinet assembled on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, July 5, 6 and 7, 1863.⁶² On Monday and Tuesday, September 14-15, 1863, while the problem of *habeas corpus* was

⁵⁹*Diary* I, 549. March 30, 1864.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, II, 237.

⁶¹*Ibid.* I, 207-211.

⁶²*Ibid.*, I, 359 ff.

before the Council, there were three meetings—two of them occurring on the second day.⁶³

The records of Welles give much evidence on the subject of attendance at council sessions. At most sessions the President was of course present, but not always. Welles himself was (in his own words) “less absent than any other member.”⁶⁴ In attendance Stanton was the most unaccountable member, particularly during 1863, when, according to the Secretary of the Navy, Stanton did not attend half the meetings.⁶⁵ Some he willfully ignored. Seward likewise and Chase were variable: they as well as Stanton would sometimes withdraw when the rest of the Council had assembled or very soon afterwards.⁶⁶

Although there were regular cabinet days and some effort at order from near the opening of the administration, the cabinet sessions often seemed perfunctory or nearly useless. Welles, Chase and Blair, possibly others, voiced at different times the complaint that the Government was administered too much by heads of departments not properly co-ordinated or acting on that common understanding which cabinet sessions could or should bring about. It was certainly a recurrent note sounded over many months. Nevertheless, looking back on the last night of 1863 over the year that had passed, the Secretary of the Navy was able to say this of Lincoln:

“The President has well maintained his position, and under trying circumstances acquitted himself in a manner that will be better appreciated in the future than now. . . . The

⁶³*Diary*. I, 431-434.

⁶⁴*Ibid.* I, 431.

⁶⁵*Ibid.* I, 320. June 2, 1863.

⁶⁶*Ibid.*, See under dates: September 12, 1862; July 24, August 14, 1863; June 24, 1864.

Cabinet, if a little discordant in some of its elements, has been united as regards him."⁶⁷

Certain outsiders were admitted occasionally to cabinet sessions—General Scott and Commodore Stringham among others near the outset of the administration. On Friday, July 31, 1863, Colonel Rawlins on General Grant's staff delivered the official report of the siege of Vicksburg and the capture of Pemberton's army. He was before the Cabinet for two hours and from Welles's description of the occasion any reader may gather that the interview was both interesting and very informing. About a fortnight later, on Friday, August 14, the victor of Gettysburg, General Meade, called unexpectedly at the executive mansion while the Cabinet was in session. It is manifest from the record that the Secretary of the Navy, and probably his colleagues could not forget that Meade had allowed Lee to escape into Virginia. There are no details. Quite the best known appearance of an outsider at a cabinet session is probably that of General Grant who was present at the last cabinet session which Lincoln was destined ever to attend—the session on the morning of the fatal Friday, April 14, 1865—five days after Lee's surrender at Appomatox. It was Good Friday. A sense of deep and tranquil happiness had come over the country, and was particularly felt in the nation's capital. That very morning Grant reached the city and on arriving went to the executive mansion. Here Welles found him in conversation with Lincoln and several cabinet officers. Lincoln invited Grant to remain for the cabinet session that was about to be held.

The meeting opened with talk about General Sherman. Anxiety was expressed as to the probable outcome of Sherman's movements against the Confeder-

⁶⁷*Diary*, I, 500.

ates under Johnston. Grant was expecting news from Sherman at any moment. The President assured Grant and the assembled advisers that the news would come soon and be favorable, for he said that he had had on the preceding night a dream. This dream, he added, was apt to come before some great event. He had had the same dream before Sumter, Bull Run, Antietam, Gettysburg, Stone River, Vicksburg, and Wilmington. At Welles's request Lincoln related the dream:

"He said it related to your (my) element, the water; that he seemed to be in some singular, indescribable vessel, and that he was moving with great rapidity towards an indefinite shore. . . ."

The account of the dream, slight as it was, made an impression on the minds of several listeners, and was recalled vividly by them after the happenings of the next twenty-four hours or so. Then followed the serious business of the session: (i) a consideration of the problem of reestablishing trade relations with the districts so recently in rebellion by opening the ports and arousing natural commercial and social intercourse in at least that portion of the South east of the Mississippi river. Grant was frequently appealed to as familiar with conditions, and gave useful information and counsel. (ii) A matter of greater perplexity was the problem which had confronted the Cabinet for many months—that of political readjustment and reconstruction. Stanton had already drawn up his ideas in the shape of a plan or ordinance which was then before the Council. This ordinance, taken in connection with the regulations of the Peirpont régime in Virginia, would afford an outline of government which, according to Lincoln's view, should not be ignored. Stanton's ordinance was finally referred back to the Secretary

of War, with directions from Lincoln that it be brought forward once more, having undergone sundry changes, at the next meeting of the Cabinet on the Tuesday following, April 18. Copies of the Stanton ordinance were to be made in order that it might be closely examined by every member of the Cabinet. With this understanding, the meeting was dismissed.

Our knowledge of this cabinet session rests chiefly on the evidence furnished by Mr. Welles. We know from him that Grant remained through the meeting. Seward was absent, confined as the result of a recent accident to his house. Speed, the Attorney-General, and Usher of the Interior Department were not present; otherwise the Cabinet was complete.

There were other instances of outsiders admitted to cabinet sessions during the Lincoln epoch. I have given instances enough to indicate how at critical times the Cabinet sought enlightenment from visitors. The Lincoln Cabinet simply adopted a practice that Polk and no doubt other preceding chief magistrates had found useful.

There are several illustrations of written opinions being exacted by Lincoln from his chosen advisers: (i) opinions in writing were taken in December, 1862, with reference to the proposal to divide Virginia into Virginia and West Virginia⁶⁸; (ii) again, about the same time, Seward, Chase, Welles, Bates, and Blair had each something to offer in writing with reference to the final formulation of the Proclamation of Emancipation⁶⁹; and (iii) in the following April, 1863, the Peterhoff Case was sufficiently technical and trying to make it incumbent on the President to get such written

⁶⁸*Diary*. I, 208. Monday, December 29.

⁶⁹*Ibid.* I, 210-211. Cf. Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln* VI, 405-419 (*passim*).

opinions as he could from those well-informed on questions of international law. The usefulness of Welles was peculiarly evident in this latter instance.

The "Peterhoff" was a British merchant steamer bound for the Mexican port of Matamoras, but captured with goods intended for the Mexicans and government mails. The Cabinet was especially concerned with the problem of the proper disposition of the mails. It was not a subject of widespread public consideration, but inasmuch as this aspect of the case was sure to be watched closely by the British government, any mishandling of it might, it was felt at the time, lead us into grave international difficulties. In fact the problem concealed unlimited trouble with England. Lincoln was quick to recognize its gravity. Although the ultimate settlement of the case rested with the courts—it was actually decided by the Supreme Court in 1866⁷⁰—the President, desiring that the diplomatic point should be clearly grasped as a matter of general policy, called on the Secretary of State and the Secretary of the Navy for written opinions. Welles labored on his opinion for the better portion of a week and presented under date of April 25 a long and carefully studied paper.⁷¹ The mail, Welles contended, could be examined by the prize court before it was delivered up to the British government or sent to its destination. Seward, having rather summarily—as it seemed to Welles—adopted a different principle in a letter written the previous October which was in the nature of an order to blockading and naval officers (a letter, be it said, which had come to the knowledge of Lord Lyons, English minister in Washington) at-

⁷⁰ 5 *Wallace*, pp. 28-62. The opinion was delivered by Chief Justice Chase, a member of the Cabinet in 1863.

⁷¹ *Diary*. I, 266-310 (*passim*). *Lincoln and Seward*, pp. 100 ff. Cf. W. E. Hall, *International Law* (4 ed., 1895), pp. 703 ff.

tempted to dispute Welles's contention. Senator Sumner sustained the Welles point of view. And in the writers cited by Welles there was undoubtedly some ground for it. Yet, read today, the opinion of Secretary Welles fails to carry conviction. But before Welles's opinion was given, Seward had followed out his original design, for on April 21 he instructed Charles Francis Adams, our minister in London, that the Peterhoff's mail would be forwarded to its destination unopened.⁷² There cannot be much doubt that Seward acted in a way least likely to provoke on the part of England ill-feeling, whatever the law in the case. His high-principled and industrious opponent, the Secretary of the Navy, had at least proved to the President his watchfulness over the national interests so far as his department was concerned.

The period of the War was so very unusual and brought such strain upon all parts of the government, but especially upon the executive administration, that it would be surprising to find even the Cabinet an altogether normal institution under the circumstances. Yet our best recent evidence goes to show that the Council was directed through most of the period pretty effectively, with some regard to system and order of meetings. Welles wrote:

"Measures and important movements of each of the departments were generally, but not always, submitted to the Cabinet. The President was invariably consulted. . . . The policy of the President and the course of administration were based on substantial principles and convictions to which he firmly adhered."⁷³

He was no martinet, like Polk. But he was a man of

⁷²J. B. Moore, *Digest of International Law* (1906), VII, ch. xxiv, §1201.

⁷³*Lincoln and Seward*, p. 47.

real discernment in state affairs, and a very shrewd judge of men.

VII.

Seward, Welles, and Hugh McCulloch of Indiana—the latter successor in the Treasury Secretaryship to W. P. Fessenden—all remained in Andrew Johnson's Cabinet for the next four years. This was undoubtedly a fortunate circumstance, for, generally speaking, Johnson's administration was hardly normal in its more intimate or interior workings. The Cabinet, easily affected by its environment and somewhat swayed from its usual practices by strained relations between several of its members and the chief magistrate, was never a specially congenial or homogeneous body. As early as July, 1866, three of the advisers, Postmaster-General Dennison, Attorney-General Speed, and the Secretary of the Interior James Harlan of Iowa, resigned from the Council, and their places had to be filled. Stanton, the Secretary of War, by declining to resign until he was virtually forced to do so and actually suspended from his place by order of Johnson, created intolerable difficulties for the President. But meantime dissentient and radical members of the House had forced impeachment proceedings and thus wracked the executive power to its foundations, bringing about a national crisis and preventing any normal equilibrium between executive and legislative forces for the remainder of the ill-fated term. The impeachment was the gravest incident in the history of the Presidency. But it is remarkable that it did not interfere more vitally than it appears to have done in the matter of cabinet sessions. In March, 1868, there is the highest record of cabinet sessions to be found during any single month of cabinet history that I have ever examined—

seventeen, all told. In January, 1848, Polk's Cabinet, then hard at work on the settlement of Mexican affairs, met fourteen times. But in March, 1868, it is of course to be remembered that Johnson's Cabinet was endeavoring to save the political life of the chief magistrate against thoroughly embittered foes.

The *Diary* of Welles gives some evidence on nearly 300 Cabinet sessions (297) of the administration. The Tuesday-Friday rule was maintained as it had been for the greater part of Lincoln's terms. The Cabinet met in the forenoon, probably at eleven o'clock, but noon meetings were not uncommon.⁷⁴ Meetings at other times were rare, and Sunday meetings especially so unless there was an emergency. In June, 1865, Welles remarked:

"The meetings are better and more punctually attended than under Mr. Lincoln's administration, and measures are more generally discussed, which undoubtedly tends to better administration. . ."⁷⁵

Attention was paid to the rank of the officers in speaking at sessions, for on at least one occasion the Secretary of the Interior was mentioned as having first spoken out of turn.⁷⁶ As early as June, 1865, there were rumors from the outside that the impression was gaining ground that Congress and the Judiciary were being ignored—that they were "mere instruments" in the hands of an over-bearing executive who meant to direct affairs very much as he pleased.⁷⁷ Stanton's course in the War Department was proving unsatisfactory to some of his cabinet colleagues.⁷⁸ And even Johnson by the winter of 1865 had aroused sufficient

⁷⁴See *Diary*, March 10, July 28, November 17, 1868.

⁷⁵June 20.

⁷⁶May 1, 1866; January 8, 1867.

⁷⁷June 30.

⁷⁸August 8, 1865.

antagonism to mark him for possible impeachment by the House.⁷⁹ Stanton, Harlan, and Speed were all of them displeased by the President's veto of the Freedmen's Bureau bill in the early spring of 1866.⁸⁰ Although Welles remarked on a "pleasant and harmonious" session of the Cabinet on February 20 of that year, the expression seemed to imply that such meetings were becoming worthy of comment and rather unusual. Within the next few months the President had become quite dissatisfied with several of his regular counsellors.⁸¹ There was lack of cordiality among them.

In the spring of 1867 there was very general disapproval in the Council of the Tenure of Office bill. Stanbery, one of the ablest Attorneys-General who have ever sat in the Cabinet, was perfectly clear in his position. Seward and Stanton were asked by Johnson to prepare a veto message, and they did so.⁸² It was in August of that year that the President requested Stanton's resignation.⁸³ Failing to receive it, he suspended him and appointed Grant as *ad interim* Secretary of War—a decision that led to endless complications. It is not to be inferred that Cabinet sessions became much less frequent as troubles heaped up; though there may have been some falling off in regularity: for Welles declared occasionally that the President had "no confidants" and failed to communicate freely with his advisers.⁸⁴ Written opinions, though unusual, were occasionally requested.⁸⁵ Votes in cabinet sessions were

⁷⁹December 11.

⁸⁰February 19.

⁸¹April 14.

⁸²February 26, August 6, 1867.

⁸³August 5.

⁸⁴Cf. *Diary* under August 31, 1867; February 22, 28, March 17, 1868.

⁸⁵January 4, February 15, 1867.

likewise infrequent.⁸⁶ But we find two very careful and elaborate records of as many cabinet sessions held on June 18-19, 1867—still in the Johnson Manuscripts. These records carefully taken down in a clerical hand, indicate the whole course of proceedings in cabinet on the subject during two days of a discussion of the Reconstruction Acts. Johnson wished to be perfectly clear about the interpretation of the acts, and had an opinion of the Attorney-General as a basis for discussion beside the text (in print) of the Acts themselves. Many votes were taken on the different points of interpretation involved—all carefully recorded; and they reveal today a unique official record of that troublesome period.⁸⁷

Outside the circle of the regular counsellors there appeared from time to time others: notably on various occasions the assistant secretaries of the Departments when, for any reason, the Secretaries were absent. Welles makes occasional note of them and objects to speaking of the more intimate matters concerning policy in their presence.⁸⁸ Johnson's private secretary, Colonel Moore must often have been present, probably with marked regularity—fulfilling very much such a function as did Polk's secretary, J. Knox Walker in the years, 1845-49. Indeed Washington had his Tobias Lear who, though not recorded at any of Washington's cabinet sessions, may yet have attended occasionally. Lear, Walker, Moore—and Mr. Joseph Tumulty. Although there is no doubt about the rule of numerous administrations in having the Cabinet summoned by the Secretary of State, it is I think, altogether probable that some variety of cabinet sessions

⁸⁶July 21, 1865.

⁸⁷*Johnson Papers*. MSS. in Library of Congress, vol. 115.

⁸⁸*Diary*.

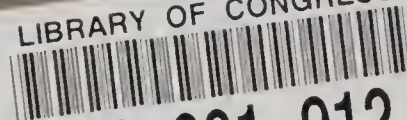
have been summoned by the private secretary from early times to the present day.

Large allowance must be made for Welles's rather persistent inclination to criticise Secretary Seward. But when he speaks of Seward on a Saturday in January, 1867, "dancing round Stevens, Sumner, Boutwell, Banks and others," of his running to the Capitol and seating himself first by Stevens in the House and then by Sumner in the Senate, a matter which made comment in the galleries and provided the reporters of those days with gossip for the newspapers, he not only is amusingly picturesque, however irritated by the practice he may be, but he also, all unconsciously, affords to the historian a glimpse of truth that relieves somewhat the figure of the Premier in the staid and sober sessions of Johnson's Cabinet Council.⁸⁹

The Cabinet, although strictly speaking unrecognized by Constitution or law—mentioned but once, so far as I am aware, in a federal statute—is yet an institution fixed by the force of old practices now amounting to strong customs in our national scheme of government. It provided all Presidents with a corps of experts, qualified, if well chosen, in many matters only to be comprehended by men of learning or ripe and varied experience. Its meetings constitute only one aspect of its importance. But they afford, if it can be extracted from very refractory materials, the very essence of its purpose and its usefulness.

⁸⁹*Diary*. III, 25-26.

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